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Beyond Benchmarks: Unpacking the Economics of NAAC Accreditation

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ABSTRACT

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) accreditation is a pivotal quality assurance mechanism in Indian higher education, yet its economic implications remain underexplored. This study investigates the multifaceted costs, benefits, and systemic impacts of NAAC accreditation on higher education institutions (HEIs), with a focus on resource allocation, institutional behaviour, and equity. Employing cost-benefit analysis, resource dependency theory, and an equity perspective, we examine how economic factors shape the accreditation experience. NAAC accreditation enhances funding eligibility, student enrolment, placement rates, and institutional reputation, driving improvements in infrastructure, teaching, and research output. However, it imposes significant financial and operational burdens, particularly on under-resourced rural colleges, including direct costs like fees, infrastructure upgrades, and consultancy expenses, as well as indirect costs such as faculty time and administrative workload. These challenges exacerbate urban-rural disparities, as resource-rich urban institutions leverage private funding while rural colleges face systemic barriers. Moreover, NAAC's quantitative benchmarks often prioritize compliance over innovation, risking short-termism and reinforcing educational inequities. We critique these economic dynamics and propose reforms, including targeted subsidies for rural HEIs, simplified accreditation processes, enhanced IT infrastructure, and revised evaluation metrics that prioritize inclusivity and regional context. By addressing these challenges, NAAC can foster equitable and sustainable quality improvements. This paper calls for further empirical research to deepen understanding of accreditation's economic impacts and align it with India's goals of inclusive and innovative higher education.

Keywords: NAAC Accreditation, Economics of Accreditation, Higher Education Funding, Institutional Reputation, Student Enrolment, Resource Mobilization, Rural-Urban Disparities, Cost-Benefit Analysis, Quality Assurance in Education

INTRODUCTION

Accreditation in higher education serves as a tool for evaluating institutional and program performance through external monitoring and recognition of adherence to predetermined standards (Eaton, 2009). Close monitoring and accreditation of academic programs enhance educational quality (Alani &Ilusanya, 2008). Moreover, accreditation systems foster stakeholder growth by significantly improving the quality of education provided by accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014).

Quality assurance in higher education is a global priority, and in India, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1994, plays a pivotal role in evaluating higher education institutions (HEIs).While much attention is paid to the academic metrics of NAAC accreditation, this study focuses on the economic aspects that underpin the accreditation process. The existing literature predominantly focuses on the qualitative aspects of NAAC, such as the implementation of quality parameters, curriculum development, research output, and governance structures. However, the economic dimensions, including the direct costs involved, the potential for increased revenue, and the ability to attract resources based on accreditation status, warrant a more comprehensive examination. The economic implications of NAAC accreditation have remained underexplored. This paper deconstructs the economics of NAAC accreditation, focusing on cost-benefit dynamics, resource constraints, and regional disparities. This research seeks to unpack these economic facets. This paper addresses the research question: How do economic factors shape the NAAC accreditation experience, and what lies beyond mere benchmarks?

NAAC Accreditation: Voluntary, Not Mandatory

At present, the NAAC's assessment and accreditation process is voluntary, not mandatory. The accreditation can be a lengthy process that demands time, energy, and resources. Some institutions might lack the capacity or resources to complete the process, or they might prioritise other initiatives. Yet others may be reluctant to participate or worried about the possibility of receiving unfavourable outcomes. According to a notification dated January 19, 2013 issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC), it is mandatory for higher education institutions in India i.e., all colleges and universities to get NAAC accreditation. In reply to an unstarred question in Rajya Sabha in December 2024, on the number of HEIs in the country accredited by NAAC, the government informed that till date, out of 1,168 universities and 45,473 colleges, 498 universities and 10,652 colleges have been accredited under the current framework. Thus, a total of 670 universities and 34,821 colleges across India are operating without NAAC accreditation. This implies that 57% of the universities and 76% of the colleges in the country are operating without any NAAC accreditation. Although, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has mandated NAAC grades for receiving central grants, and several state governments have been nudging colleges and universities to opt for NAAC assessment. However, the fact is that still the majority of colleges and universities have shied away from the assessment. In government, there are no incentives or even recognition for scoring a good NAAC grade, neither for the institution nor for the principal and the staff involved.

Theoretical Framework: Economics of Accreditation

Accreditation, while framed as a tool for quality assurance, has economic implications at multiple levels: capital investment in infrastructure, operational costs, faculty training, and long-term financial benefits in terms of grants and student intake. As Altbach (2004) argues, "quality assurance mechanisms invariably reshape institutional resource allocation priorities".This analysis employs three theoretical lenses:

Cost-Benefit Analysis:

Accreditation entails direct costs (e.g., fees, infrastructure upgrades) and indirect costs (e.g., faculty time), balanced against benefits like funding eligibility, improved placements, and reputational gains.Jain and Paliwal (2024) highlight that accreditation drives improvements in infrastructure, teaching, publications, and diversity, benefiting stakeholders such as students, faculty, and staff. The process is economically viable only when benefits outweigh costs.

Resource Dependency Theory:

Resource dependency theory posits that HEIs rely on external resources (Pfeffer &Salancik, 1978).Rural colleges, dependent on limited government grants, struggle to meet NAAC's research and infrastructure criteria, creating a dependency trap.

Equity Perspective:

Accreditation exacerbates urban-rural disparities, as urban colleges leverage private funding while rural ones face systemic barriers, framing accreditation as an economic justice issue.

Economic Costs of NAAC Accreditation

NAAC accreditation imposes significant financial and operational burdens, particularly on resource-constrained HEIs.

4.1 Direct Costs

NAAC accreditation involves several direct financial costs such as fees for registration, logistical expenses during peer team visits, consultancy fees for external experts, and infrastructure upgrades. These costs can be categorized as follows:

Preparation Cost

Preparing the Self-Study Report (SSR) requires significant time and resources for assessing and reporting program quality to meet accreditation standards (Zulu et al., 2004; Jones & Saram, 2005; Khanna, 2007; Cardoso et al., 2016).This involves faculty and administrative effort, with substantial opportunity costs as regular academic activities may be impacted. Institutions may also invest in data collection systems, software, or external consultants to streamline preparation.

Cost Implications of Language Barriers

There is a critical language Issue in documentation and has consequent cost implications. In SSR only one language English is used, not even Hindi is allowed. Non-English-medium colleges, including Sanskrit institutions, incur high costs for translation and editing, as SSRs must be in English. For most of the Government Colleges and Rural Colleges the main medium of instructions is either Hindi or Regional Language.

Consultant Fees

Often Higher Educational Institutions hire consultants, both individual as well as professional agencies for preparing their Self Study Reports which is highly costly, straining budgets especially in case of government colleges.

Assessment and Accreditation Fees

NAAC charges a specific fee for the assessment and accreditation process (₹2 lakhs to ₹6 lakhs plus GST), which varies based on the type of institution (NAAC, 2023). This is a direct financial burden that HEIs must budget for.

Infrastructure Upgradation

To meet the criteria set by NAAC, institutions may need to invest in upgrading their infrastructure, including classrooms, laboratories, libraries, IT infrastructure, and other learning resources. These upgrades can involve significant capital expenditure. NAAC expects facilities beyond minimum UGC and AICTE standards, requiring costly improvements.

Training and Capacity Building

Institutions often need to conduct workshops and training programs for their faculty and staff to familiarize them with NAAC guidelines and best practices in quality assurance. These training programs involve direct costs for resource persons, travel, and logistics.

Logistical Expenses for Peer Team Visit

During the peer team visit, the institution incurs expenses related to the accommodation, travel, and hospitality of the NAAC peer team members. Part of this expense is deposited in advance with the NAAC and local travel has to be arranged by the institution.

Indirect Costs

Institutions often incur indirect costs including administrative hours, faculty workload for documentation, and diversion of academic resources. The pursuit of quality indicators often leads institutions to allocate disproportionate resources towards compliance rather than innovation.

Administrative Burden and Time-Intensive Processes

The NAAC accreditation process is inherently complex and demanding, requiring higher education institutions to adhere strictly to prescribed guidelines and produce meticulous documentation. This intricate process is both laborious and time-consuming, often involving overly tedious bureaucratic procedures and extensive paperwork. The heavy reliance on comprehensive data collection and documentary evidence significantly increases the administrative workload for faculty and staff, diverting their time and resources from core academic responsibilities. All application materials must be completed precisely as per NAAC's specifications, as incomplete or inaccurate submissions can lead to prolonged processing times or outright rejection of accreditation applications. This administrative burden, characterized by repetitive and detailed documentation requirements, represents a fundamental challenge of the NAAC accreditation process, necessitating rationalization to reduce strain on institutional resources while maintaining quality assurance standards.

Opportunity Costs:

The NAAC accreditation process imposes significant opportunity costs on institutions by diverting critical resources away from core academic activities. The preparation of the Self-Study Report (SSR) and compliance with accreditation requirements demand substantial time and effort from faculty and staff, often at the expense of teaching and student support services. Faculty members are frequently required to prioritize extensive documentation, data collection, and administrative tasks over classroom engagement, curriculum development, and student mentoring. This shift in focus can lead to reduced teaching quality and limited availability for student guidance. Additionally, the time spent on accreditation activities curtails research productivity, as faculty have less capacity to pursue scholarly work or publish research. These trade-offs represent a significant indirect cost, as institutions may need to allocate additional resources to compensate for diminished academic output, such as hiring temporary staff or delaying research initiatives, to balance accreditation demands with educational priorities.

Compliance over Creativity

The NAAC accreditation process often places a heavy emphasis on standardized documentation and quantifiable metrics, which can inadvertently prioritize compliance over fostering creativity and innovation in academic institutions. This focus may lead institutions to allocate resources and efforts toward activities that align with NAAC's evaluation criteria, potentially sidelining initiatives that promote long-term academic excellence. For example, the rigorous demands of preparing detailed reports and meeting specific benchmarks can discourage faculty from experimenting with innovative pedagogical approaches, such as experiential or student-cantered learning methods. Similarly,

interdisciplinary initiatives, which often require flexibility and risk-taking, may be deprioritized in favour of more easily measurable outcomes that align with NAAC's framework. This shift can stifle academic creativity, limit institutional adaptability, and reduce opportunities for groundbreaking research or teaching practices, representing a significant indirect cost of the accreditation process.

Effective IQAC Functioning

The NAAC accreditation process hinges on the effective functioning of the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), which serves as the backbone for coordinating quality assurance activities within the institution. Ensuring a cohesive and efficient IQAC involves significant indirect costs. The IQAC coordinator and its members often require reduced teaching loads to dedicate sufficient time to accreditation-related tasks, such as data collection, report preparation, and compliance monitoring. This reduction in teaching responsibilities may necessitate hiring additional faculty or redistributing workloads, increasing operational costs. Furthermore, the IQAC requires dedicated secretarial support to manage documentation, scheduling, and communication effectively. This support involves allocating resources for skilled administrative staff, infrastructure, and tools, which adds to the financial and logistical burden. A well-supported IQAC is critical to streamline the accreditation process, but it demands careful planning and resource allocation to maintain its efficiency and cohesion.

Sustaining Staff Morale and Motivation

The NAAC accreditation process imposes considerable demands on institutional staff, including faculty, administrative personnel, and support teams, creating significant pressure that can challenge morale and well-being. This represents a critical indirect cost, as maintaining high levels of motivation and a positive work environment is essential for successful accreditation. The process requires cohesive teamwork, with staff collaborating across departments to meet stringent deadlines and comply with complex criteria. However, the laborious, time-consuming, and often tedious nature of the accreditation tasks—such as extensive documentation and bureaucratic procedures—can lead to fatigue, burnout, or disengagement if not addressed. To counter this, institutions must foster empathy and compassion within teams, acknowledging that the intensive workload may disrupt personal lives and family commitments. Implementing morale-boosting measures, such as recognition programs, stress management workshops, or additional support resources, is vital to sustain commitment and productivity. Moreover, cultivating a proactive mindset—moving away from a complacent "what happens if we get a 'C' grade" attitude—through effective planning and time management is crucial to align staff efforts with the institution's quality assurance goals.

Economic Benefits of NAAC Accreditation

Despite costs, NAAC accreditation offers significant economic advantages.

Increased Funding and Grants

NAAC accreditation is a crucial criterion for eligibility for various grants and funding schemes offered by the UGC and other government bodies. Institutions with higher accreditation grades often receive preferential treatment and larger grants. Institutions with higher grades (A and above) are more likely to secure funding from schemes like RUSA (RashtriyaUchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan) and DST-FIST (Department of Science & Technology Fund for Improvement of S&T Infrastructure).

Student Enrolment and Tuition Revenue

Accreditation significantly correlates with higher enrolment rates in both public and private sectors (Espinoza & González, 2013).A good NAAC grade enhances the reputation and credibility of an institution, making it a more attractive choice for prospective students. Increased enrolment directly translates to higher tuition fee revenue. NAAC accreditation significantly correlates with improved student enrolment rates in both public and private sectors.

Enhanced Fee Structures

Accredited institutions, particularly those with higher grades, may have the leverage to justify slightly higher fee structures due to the perceived quality of education they offer.

Market Signalling and Enhanced Resource Mobilization

NAAC grades function as a market signal, influencing employer preferences, institutional collaborations, and alumni donations. This creates an incentive structure that aligns with market dynamics rather than purely academic concerns. Thus, NAAC accreditation can significantly improve an institution's ability to mobilize resources beyond government funding and student fees:

Alumni Engagement

A strong NAAC accreditation can foster greater pride and engagement among alumni, leading to increased donations and philanthropic support.

Industry Partnerships

Accredited institutions with a proven track record of quality and research are more likely to attract partnerships and sponsorships from industries and corporate entities.

Consultancy and Ventures

Higher-graded institutions may attract opportunities for consultancy projects, collaborative research ventures with industries or other institutions, and the offering of specialized programs, all of which can generate additional revenue.

International Collaborations

Accreditation enhances global competitiveness, attracting foreign students and funding through partnerships and exchange programs (Jisha, 2015; Kawaledar, 2015).NAAC accreditation can enhance the international standing of an institution, making it a more desirable partner for collaborations with foreign universities, potentially leading to joint programs, research funding, and student exchange programs.

Private Funding

Higher accreditation grades can make institutions more attractive to private funding agencies and trusts looking to invest in quality education.

Intangible Benefits

The intangible benefits of NAAC accreditation, particularly enhanced reputation, have significant economic consequences. Accreditation builds brand value, enhances graduate employability, and attracts quality faculty, creating a virtuous cycle of growth

Brand Building:

A good NAAC grade acts as a quality stamp, building a strong brand image for the institution. This enhanced reputation attracts better quality students and faculty.

Competitive Advantage

In the increasingly competitive higher education landscape, NAAC accreditation provides a significant competitive advantage over non-accredited or lower-graded institutions.

Increased Employability:

Graduates from accredited institutions are preferred by employers, improving placement rates (Westerheijden et al., 2007; Espinoza & González, 2013).Employers often prefer graduates from accredited institutions, perceiving them as having received a higher quality of education. This can lead to better placement rates for students, further enhancing the institution's reputation and attracting more enrolments.

Attracting Faculty:

Accredited institutions attract and retain qualified faculty, enhancing educational quality (Westerheijden et al., 2007).A reputable and well-accredited institution is more likely to attract and retain highly qualified and experienced faculty, which in turn contributes to the quality of education and further strengthens the institution's standing.

Greater Motivation

Recommendations provided by accrediting agencies are often seen as motivating andencouraging the higher education institutions to develop strategic plans for changesand improvement (Urgel, 2007).A NAAC survey found positive impacts on pedagogical, managerial, and administrative functioning (Jain & Paliwal, 2024).

Beyond Benchmarks: Economic Realities and Challenges

While NAAC accreditation offers significant economic benefits, HEIs, particularly those in resource-constrained environments like government colleges especially in poor states face challenges:

Rural-Urban Disparities

The colleges in urban areas have sufficient resources and they leverage their resources to achieve higher grades, whereas the colleges in rural or semi-urban areas face constraints, both physical and financial. Several rural colleges struggle with outdated infrastructure. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2022 reports rural colleges have fewer faculty (15 vs. 40 in urban colleges) and lower per-student expenditure (₹20,000 vs. ₹50,000) (AISHE, 2022). Besides this, there are geographical challenges and the hill-area colleges and colleges in rural and remote areas face isolation-related costs. These colleges also incur high expenses for peer team travel due to its remote location.

Inequitable Resource Distribution:

Elite institutions are better equipped to meet NAAC criteria due to existing resources, while smaller colleges especially in rural areas and government colleges struggle to meet benchmarks. This can reinforce existing hierarchies in the higher education system. NAAC's metrics favour resource-rich colleges.

Corruption and Unethical Practices in NAAC Accreditation

Economic pressures have fuelled unethical practices that erode the credibility of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). A notable example is the 2023 KLEF University bribery case, which exposed systemic vulnerabilities in the accreditation process (CBI, 2023). Allegations of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) manipulating NAAC grades through practices like offering "regal treatment" to peer review teams or engaging dubious consultants reveal a deeper malaise. Such misconduct not only undermines the integrity of the institutions involved but also jeopardizes the trust in India's higher education system.

The NAAC relies on academic assessors to evaluate HEIs and assign grades critical for reputation, funding, and autonomy. However, the 2023 scandal highlighted how some institutions exploit this process, using financial incentives to secure favourable ratings, misleading stakeholders, and gaining undue advantages. These practices, coupled with the reliance on questionable intermediaries, have sparked calls for stringent reforms to curb corruption and restore accountability.

Despite efforts to address these issues, skepticism persists. Critics argue that the NAAC's past inefficiencies and entrenched practices continue to challenge its legitimacy, necessitating robust measures to ensure transparency and fairness in the accreditation process.

Short-Termism versus Sustained Quality

The pursuit of high NAAC grades often pushes Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to prioritize short-term, superficial improvements over sustained quality enhancements, undermining the accreditation's aim of fostering long-term educational excellence. Maintaining high grades requires ongoing investment in infrastructure, faculty training, and academic programs, which poses significant financial challenges, particularly for smaller or resource-constrained institutions. However, some HEIs focus on cosmetic changes—such as temporary upgrades to facilities or polished documentation—to impress NAAC peer review teams, rather than pursuing systemic reforms. This short-termism distorts the accreditation process, diverting resources from core priorities like teaching and student development. The NAAC's emphasis on measurable metrics, such as physical infrastructure or research output, may inadvertently encourage these practices, as institutions seek quick compliance over meaningful progress. To address this, NAAC should revise its assessment framework to prioritize evidence of sustained quality improvements, such as consistent teaching excellence and long-term institutional development, ensuring accreditation reflects genuine commitment to educational goals.

Subjectivity of Peer Team:

The NAAC accreditation process relies heavily on peer team evaluations, where subjective judgments, particularly by the chairperson, significantly influence qualitative scores. The chairperson's institutional background often shapes their assessment standards: those from prestigious institutions may apply stricter criteria compared to those from less renowned ones, leading to inconsistencies in evaluations. This subjectivity is an inherent challenge in qualitative assessments, as personal biases and experiences can affect scoring. Additionally, the student profile of an institution impacts peer team perceptions. HEIs with selective, merit-based admissions often receive favourable evaluations due to stronger academic performance, while government institutions, mandated to admit all eligible applicants, may face disadvantages despite their commitment to inclusive education. This observation is not a critique of inclusive policies but highlights a structural challenge in accreditation. To mitigate subjectivity, NAAC could standardize evaluation criteria, provide training for peer teams, and account for institutional diversity, ensuring fairer and more consistent assessments.

Research Constraints in NAAC Accreditation for Affiliated Colleges

Affiliated colleges often score poorly on NAAC research metrics due to limited opportunities for faculty to engage in high-impact research activities, such as guiding MPhil/PhD students or securing research funding. Faculty in rural colleges, in particular, face significant challenges, as they are rarely designated as research guides by affiliating universities and are burdened with heavy teaching loads, leaving little time for research. This results in minimal or no scores in research-related metrics, such as publications or funded projects, which are critical for NAAC accreditation. Encouraging faculty to pursue quality research—through guiding postgraduate research, publishing papers, or authoring books—could improve scores and enhance institutional reputation. However, systemic barriers, including restrictive university policies on research supervision and limited access to research funding, hinder progress. Colleges must foster a research culture by providing incentives, reducing teaching loads, and facilitating funding opportunities. NAAC could

also adapt its metrics to better recognize the constraints of affiliated colleges, ensuring a fairer evaluation of their research contributions.

Challenges of Student-Teacher Ratio in NAAC Accreditation

The student-teacher ratio and mentor-mentee ratio are critical metrics in NAAC accreditation, significantly influencing an institution's quality assessment. However, achieving an optimal ratio poses challenges, particularly for government institutions, which have limited control over sanctioned teaching posts determined by higher-level authorities. Private institutions, with greater flexibility to hire faculty, may be better positioned to improve these ratios, but doing so requires substantial budget increases for salaries, which can strain financial resources. This disparity exacerbates inequities, as resource-constrained institutions, often in rural or public sectors, struggle to meet NAAC benchmarks compared to well-funded private colleges. The emphasis on these ratios risks prioritizing numerical compliance over qualitative teaching improvements, such as professional development or pedagogical innovation. To address this, NAAC could incorporate contextual factors, like institutional type and funding constraints, into its evaluation criteria, while institutions should explore cost-effective strategies, such as adjunct faculty or shared resources, to balance ratios without compromising educational quality.

Critical Reflections: Is NAAC Economically Justified?

NAAC accreditation enhances institutional visibility and access to funding but raises concerns about its economic justification, as it often prioritizes superficial compliance over substantive quality improvements. For instance, colleges may invest heavily in information and communication technology (ICT) tools, such as digital boards, to meet NAAC benchmarks, yet fail to provide adequate teacher training, limiting pedagogical innovation and long-term impact. Additionally, the rating system's reliance on quantifiable metrics—such as infrastructure and research output—can disadvantage inclusive institutions, particularly those in resource-constrained settings, which prioritize holistic education but lack the financial resources to meet NAAC's standards. This focus on measurable outputs risks sidelining the broader mission of equitable education, potentially reinforcing disparities between well-funded and under-resourced institutions. To ensure economic justification, NAAC should balance its criteria to value qualitative contributions, such as inclusive practices and teaching effectiveness, alongside infrastructural investments, fostering genuine quality enhancement across diverse HEIs.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing a Transparent Cost-Benefit Framework for NAAC Accreditation

To enhance the accessibility and fairness of NAAC accreditation, a transparent and standardized cost-benefit framework is essential. Disclosing detailed accreditation costs—such as fees, infrastructure upgrades, and consultancy expenses—would enable Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), particularly resource-constrained ones, to better plan and participate in the process. Standardization of cost structures could mitigate financial barriers, ensuring that accreditation is viable for diverse institutions, including rural and government colleges, without compromising quality. Policies should also articulate the tangible benefits of accreditation, such as improved funding opportunities and institutional visibility, to justify investments and align them with long-term educational goals. By implementing clear, equitable cost guidelines and promoting transparency, NAAC can foster inclusivity and ensure that accreditation remains a meaningful tool for quality enhancement across varied institutional contexts.

Financial Support Mechanisms for Rural and Marginalized HEIs

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes quality but provides limited support for rural colleges, complicating accreditation (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). To address the economic barriers faced by under-resourced Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), particularly rural and government colleges, targeted subsidies and support mechanisms are essential for equitable NAAC accreditation. Financial assistance, tailored to enrolment size or regional socio-economic needs, can help cover accreditation costs, such as infrastructure upgrades and consultancy fees, enabling these institutions to meet NAAC standards without compromising their core operations. Additionally, government and state agencies should provide technical support, including training and resources for accreditation preparation, to bridge capacity gaps in underserved regions. Such measures would level the playing field, ensuring that marginalized HEIs can participate meaningfully in the accreditation process. By implementing these support mechanisms, policymakers can promote inclusivity and enhance the overall quality of higher education across diverse institutional contexts.

Optimizing the Composition and Functioning of the IQAC for NAAC Accreditation

The Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) plays a pivotal role in the NAAC accreditation process, making its composition and operational efficiency critical to institutional success. The head of the institution should carefully select the IQAC coordinator, prioritizing competence and leadership over mere seniority, as the coordinator's ability to manage the accreditation process is paramount. To enable focused efforts, NAAC guidelines recommend reducing or

eliminating the coordinator's teaching load, a practice that should extend to key IQAC members to ensure dedicated time for accreditation tasks. The selection of IQAC members should consider their compatibility with the coordinator to foster cohesive teamwork and minimize interpersonal conflicts, which can disrupt the process.

To further enhance efficiency, the head of the institution should shield the IQAC from non-essential administrative duties for at least 18 months leading up to accreditation, allowing the team to concentrate on quality assurance activities. Recognizing that this may involve forgoing other income-generating assignments, institutions should consider compensatory measures, such as prioritizing IQAC members for remunerative roles post-accreditation. Additionally, during the peak accreditation period (particularly the final year), the IQAC should be supported by a dedicated team of at least three to four secretarial staff, working directly under the coordinator's supervision and free from routine bureaucratic tasks. These measures can strengthen the IQAC's effectiveness, ensuring a streamlined and successful NAAC accreditation process.

Enhancing IT Infrastructure for IQAC Efficiency

To support the ICT-intensive NAAC accreditation process, equipping Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) with robust IT infrastructure is critical for streamlining operations and ensuring efficiency. Providing high-performance laptops, modern computers, scanners, and printers would enable IQACs to manage online submissions, data compilation, and documentation effectively. Additionally, institutions should ensure reliable high-speed internet connectivity and software tools tailored to accreditation needs, such as data management systems. These upgrades would reduce technical barriers, particularly for under-resourced Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), and enhance the accuracy and timeliness of accreditation tasks. Policymakers should prioritize funding or subsidies for IT infrastructure in rural and government colleges to promote equitable access to accreditation processes, ensuring IQACs can operate seamlessly and contribute to institutional quality improvement.

Refining NAAC Evaluation Metrics for Equity and Relevance

To enhance the fairness and effectiveness of NAAC accreditation, evaluation metrics should be revamped to prioritize qualitative indicators that reflect institutional realities and regional contexts. Greater emphasis on parameters such as community engagement, socio-economic inclusivity, and local innovation would better recognize the contributions of diverse Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), particularly those in resource-constrained or rural areas. For instance, incorporating metrics like cost per student or regional funding equity could account for economic disparities, ensuring assessments align with institutional capacities. Additionally, NAAC should reconsider its criteria to promote academic freedom and contextual relevance, moving beyond standardized benchmarks that favour resource-rich institutions. By tailoring metrics to regional and institutional differences, NAAC can foster a more equitable and meaningful accreditation process that values holistic educational impact over uniform compliance.

Strengthening Anti-Corruption Measures for NAAC Integrity

To safeguard the integrity of NAAC accreditation and restore public trust, robust anti-corruption measures are essential to address malpractices that undermine the process. Enhanced oversight mechanisms, such as independent audits of peer team evaluations and stricter vetting of assessors, can deter unethical practices like bribery or favouritism. Implementing transparent reporting systems for accreditation activities, including financial transactions and peer team interactions, would further promote accountability. Training programs for NAAC assessors should emphasize ethical conduct and conflict-of-interest guidelines to ensure impartial evaluations. By prioritizing these measures, NAAC can rebuild its credibility, ensuring that accreditation reflects genuine institutional quality rather than manipulated outcomes, thus fostering confidence among Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and stakeholders.

Strengthening Capacity Building for Rural HEIs

To ensure equitable access to NAAC accreditation, comprehensive capacity-building initiatives are vital for rural Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), which often face resource and expertise constraints. Providing targeted training programs on accreditation processes, data management, and quality assurance practices would empower faculty and administrators to navigate NAAC requirements effectively. Additionally, technical support, such as access to accreditation software and expert guidance, can streamline preparation efforts and enhance readiness. These initiatives should be tailored to address regional challenges, such as limited infrastructure or staffing, and supported by government or NAAC-led funding to minimize financial burdens. By investing in capacity building, policymakers can enable rural HEIs to achieve accreditation success, fostering inclusive quality improvements across India's diverse higher education landscape.

CONCLUSION

NAAC accreditation serves as both a transformative opportunity and a resource-intensive challenge for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), with significant economic implications. While it enhances funding, enrolment, and

institutional reputation, the high costs—particularly for rural and under-resourced colleges—pose barriers to equitable participation. This paper underscores that NAAC accreditation is not merely a quality assurance mechanism but a complex economic phenomenon that shapes institutional behaviour, resource allocation, and public perception. To address these challenges, policymakers should prioritize targeted subsidies, refined evaluation metrics that value inclusivity and regional context, and capacity-building initiatives to support diverse HEIs. By shifting from rigid benchmarking to flexible, context-sensitive approaches, NAAC can foster sustainable quality improvements across India's varied educational landscape. Further research, including empirical case studies of accredited HEIs, is essential to deepen understanding of these economic dynamics and ensure accreditation aligns with the long-term goals of inclusive, innovative, and equitable higher education.

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